

# Our presbyteries

**Thomas Baldwin learns more about the new presbytery of Perth.**

## PRESBYTERY OF PERTH

FACTS

<b>FORMED:</b>	January 1, 2023
<b>FORMER PRESBYTERIES:</b>	Angus, Dundee, Dunkeld and Meigle, Perth, Stirling
<b>CONGREGATIONS*:</b>	154
<b>CHARGES*:</b>	92
<b>VACANCIES*:</b>	74

\*at time of going to press

LAST September a new church was opened in the Bertha Park development on the outskirts of Perth.

Created out of a former retail unit, the flexible community hub was already hosting activities for all ages, along with residents' group and community council meetings.

The minister, the Rev Anne Stott, said: "It's exciting to see how a new church might develop in a completely new housing area and finding new ways of being church that work for this century. It's also exciting seeing the enthusiasm residents have for building their new community."

The Rev Dr John Ferguson, Clerk to the Presbytery of Perth, said: "It is a clear sign that the Church of Scotland is active within our communities and can reach out with the Good News of Jesus Christ without necessarily having a conventional church building in doing so.

"We believe that the Bertha Park project points to the exciting future that the Church has in communities throughout our

presbytery.

"It is a reminder that while there are many situations of concern about the closure of buildings, there is also much good news in our presbytery to celebrate."

The opening of the new church was the undoubted highlight in the first year of the new Presbytery of Perth, formed on January 1 2023 from the merger of the former presbyteries of Angus, Dundee, Dunkeld and Meigle, Perth and Stirling.

Perth was the only one of the new presbyteries to take the name of one of its legacy presbyteries, a fact commented upon at the 2022 General Assembly when its creation was approved, but Dr Ferguson says the name makes sense: "Perth is the geographical centre, and it's where the presbytery office is."

Reflecting on the first year, Dr Ferguson says that there have been many positives, but that it has been 'challenging at times' to get to grips with a presbytery that skirts the Central Belt to the south, Cairngorms

National Park to the north, Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park to the west, and stretches up the east coast from the River Tay to Montrose. From Drymen, roughly its western-most point, to Montrose is a drive of about 103 miles and well over two hours.

"There has been a lot of work to establish the presbytery," he says. "There's the challenge of creating a sense of collegiality in a presbytery this size, how do you get to know people where there are about 400 members, how do we get people involved?"

"We're only meeting four times a year and we're now switching to hybrid (a mixture of online and in-person) meetings, which I think is the best option. We are getting there, but it's adjusting to a new way of working and also just the sense that we want to do things differently. The whole point was not just to lump presbyteries together and do the same things."

Chief among the challenges, of course, has been presbytery planning, which John admits



Perth

‘involves losing a huge number of buildings’, and dealing with the subsequent upset.

“It would have happened regardless, of course, whether the presbyteries had reformed or not,” he points out. “But dealing with it alongside the most radical planning readjustment the church has ever embarked upon, that was the real challenge.

“Planning took place at the same time as we were bringing the presbytery together, so we got five legacy plans that were all a bit different, and we have got to try to bring it together and make it one plan.

“We are getting there, but we still have got quite a long way to go.”

He admits that ‘of course’ there is a lot of unhappiness about buildings closing: “People don’t always understand why, they feel they have still got a building that’s adequate enough, maybe still financially reasonably viable, and still feel there’s plenty of life in it.

“But it’s the reality that we’ve just got far too many buildings. And there’s no

question that some are in the wrong place, or haemorrhaging money. Sometimes, in towns, it’s more the case that we have other buildings nearby and it doesn’t make sense to keep them all going.”

More positively, Dr Ferguson says he is ‘really pleased’ with the team that has formed at the office. “One of the positive things about larger presbyteries is we have got the budget to employ staff. We have just appointed a buildings officer, and we have a congregational support officer and a communications officer.

“Our primary purpose is to support congregations and support the ministry of the church, and now we have got the staff to support congregations in relation to governance, buildings, finance and so on.

“We have also got three presbytery chaplains, which are so important. We are here to pastorally support the ministry of the church within the presbytery.

“I go round different congregations on Sundays, not always to preach but just to show the face of presbytery and to help

members appreciate that presbytery is there to offer resources, support and encouragement.”

The Presbytery has also created a mission fund of £50,000 a year, that has supported projects including the Bertha Park church, and Parish Nursing at Steeple Church in Dundee. Other innovative activities taking place include Intogether, a Missional initiative being led by Perth North Church which reaches out to families of children with additional support needs; and a partnership with YMCA Tayside which has established youth groups in several parish churches (which featured in Life and Work last summer).

Asked where he hopes the presbytery will be in five years, Dr Ferguson says: “I would hope we have got to a place where the priority is no longer about buildings. I’d love it to come to a point where we are settled in our buildings, so congregations can concentrate primarily on what really matters, which is mission, and Presbytery is seen as being there to support that.” ■